

Collegiate Baseball June 2001

JOHN PINKMAN

Marketing Your Baseball Business

Business is business. It's true. Even in baseball. Many years ago a close friend gave me some fantastic advice that took me 20 years to learn. Franc was a senior VP for the Chase Bank Corporation. By no means a branch manager, Franc played tennis at the Rockefellers' home and was all of 33 years old. One day I asked him how he became so successful at such a young age. "Simple" he said, "I just find out what people want and I give it to them."

For years now our naïve little industry of baseball training has labored under a false impression. Many believed that they would become a secure, stable business just because it's America's pastime. All one really needed to do was to hire a name, rent a building, and give away free clinics and T-shirts. The concept that many aspiring entrepreneur missed in the phrase "if you build it they will come" was--- they may not stay!

In addition to cash flow, consistent instruction, operation and safety management plans, baseball schools and individual teaching pros need a marketing plan. I do not mean an advertising or sales plan – a **MARKETING** plan.

Preferably prior to opening your business you must define the following:

MARKET PLAN

- 1. Define who you are, you personally**
- 2. Define your market, the region your school will service**
- 3. Choose your market share and determine what they want**
- 4. Design your facility to meet the expectations of your customer base**
- 5. Hire and train staff to reflect customers' needs**
- 6. Assess and crosscheck your own product**
- 7. Discipline your business for manageable growth in a planned direction**

There isn't one way to create one, nor do I mean to suggest this is the best one. But if your business is to be successful, you have to lead it like a team – with vision, emotion, experience, and leadership.

1. Defining who you are is vital. What are your specific skills as an instructor? What will make you happy? What is your commitment? Are you willing to take a risk? What are your expectations? Can you last, do you have the patience to stay in the market? Do not assume people will come immediately. Like most other businesses, it will take 3 years to mature. Assess your own business skills and subcontract out the skills you lack. Don't minimize their importance because you can't do them.

Reflect your own values, dreams and goals in your business. First you must be clear what they are, especially at the beginning. Write down a mission statement. A new baseball business generally cannot be all things to all people. Your mission statement will lead you to easily identify a decision to choose between large volume, broad base, and recreational or low volume, specific and competitive. IT'S THE FORK IN THE ROAD – TAKE IT (Yogi Bera).

2. Determine your market. What is the general educational level of your area? Do the households pursue other for-fee training in sports or continuing education? Are they used to seeking and paying for information or do they just accept it from organizations or government agencies? This information is generally available from the Chamber of Commerce or other local business development agencies.

3. Identify your market share. Who are your students? Where will they come from? How far will they travel? What do they want to know and how much will they pay for it? Your fee structure should reflect not how valuable you are or were. It should reflect how much your customers value your service and how much they can afford to pay. As in any purchase, the number is directly related to what they get – don't kid yourself.

Do these buyers want day care and happy faces? Or are they looking for college scholarships? Who are the buyers of your services? Parents make decisions. That's their job. Children rarely do anything but get in the car. Aggressive, elite teenager players find out information themselves. But, and this is a BIG BUT, sometimes it's by rumor and total misinformation or unsubstantiated popularity. Either way it can adversely affect your business.

Coaches have power to anoint and condemn. However, the degree of their power on or for your business is directly linked to their own security. Coaches, who are confident in their own leadership skills and possess a need to learn, provide a positive environment for themselves and their players to seek training. Coaches who are afraid to learn and rule by intimidation and, as Tom House says, "incorrect conventional wisdom," may, in the short term, adversely effect players decision to attend your school. But players today are smart. Eventually, they will go to the source that produces results, not threats or bluster. Be confident in who you are and what you know!

4. Design your facility to reflect your current market plan. High volume needs are very different from the expectation of serious baseball students. ALWAYS DESIGN FOR SAFETY. If not, one day you'll end up in the houses – courthouse, poorhouse.

5. Hire and train staff to reflect the needs of the business – not your ego. High volume schools require crowd management and safety skills. Low volume requires additional teaching talent, advanced personal communication and lesson planning skills.

Don't take a committed teacher who is passionate about serious results and turn them into a babysitter. And vice versa. Don't ask an inexperienced instructor, who just happens to be a player, to do intensive, results oriented, one-on-one training.

6. Ask for feedback. Former New York City Mayor Ed Koch had a great public persona. Instead of saying "How are you doing?" when greeted by a constituent, Mayor Koch would beam "How'm I doin'?" It worked. Still beloved, he wasn't above direct criticism. If you are known to respect your customer, they will give you honest feedback. Their opinion and perception is vital to your future. Cover your bets as well. Do blind surveys at least once a year.

Even if your own business, never forget who you work for! Listen to your customers. Regale in the compliments, it will sustain you in the days when hard work and passion to your vision are your only assets. If they have a problem, fix it or explain the misunderstanding. Above all, don't ignore it. Every unresolved problem will be told to at least 10 other potential customers.

7. Stay focused to your plan. Don't reach for the gold ring or lunge for the carrot on a string. Be patient and consistent. Every 8 year old represents 10 years of patronage if you fulfill his and his parents' needs. It is expensive to get new customers, why lose the ones you already have? Be wary of new ventures; stay true to what made you successful in the first place.

This can be a truly emotionally rewarding business if you align your vision with the market opportunity. Above all, there is risk. Like the game, you are held accountable. Do a scouting report and study your homework. But....unlike the days of being a player, your career, if done well, never ends.